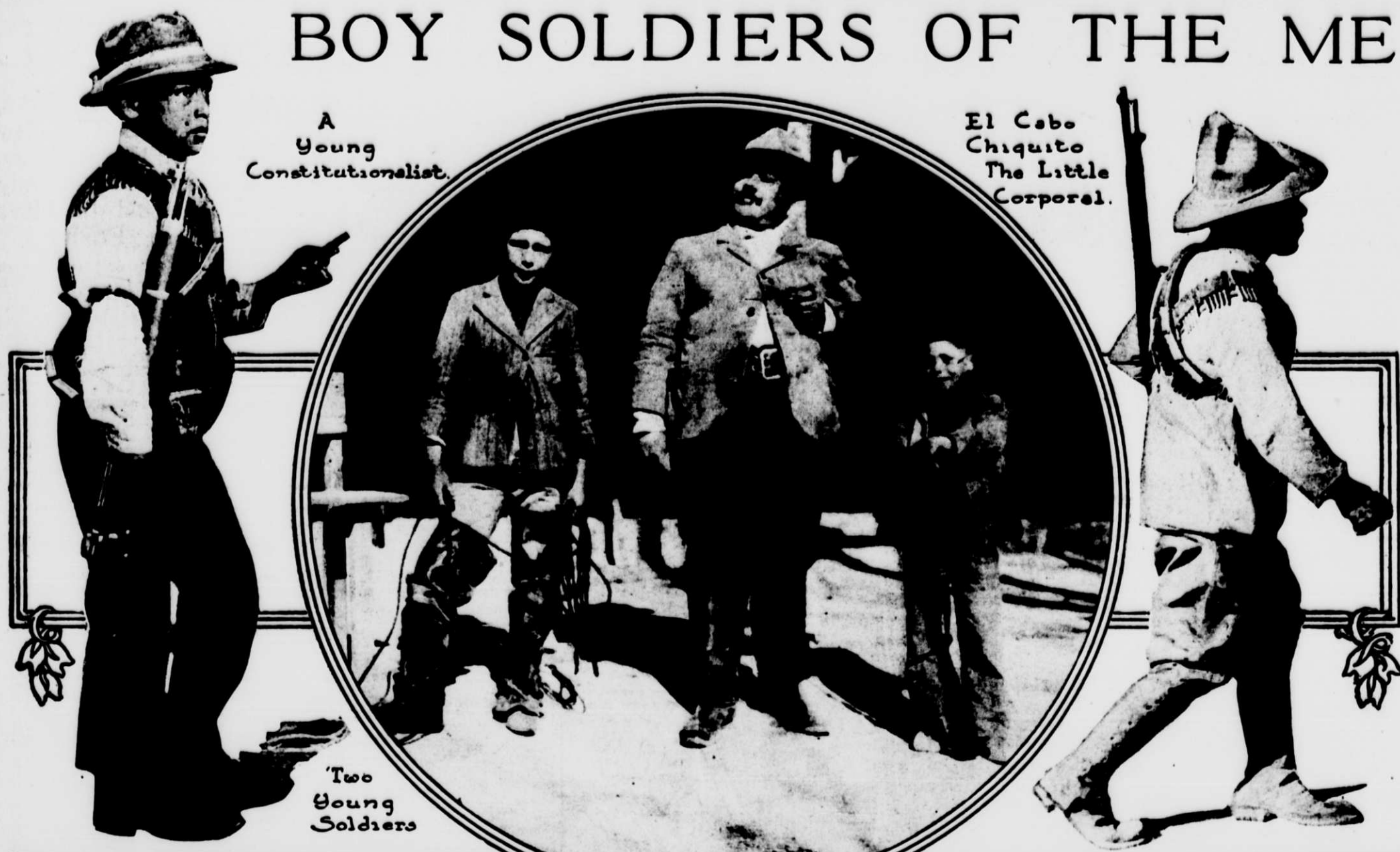


BOY SOLDIERS OF THE MEXICAN ARMIES



Thousands of Lads of No More Than School Age in the Field—Demoralization of Military Life Makes Cruel Savages of Many of Them

seldom distinguishes himself particularly, there are a score or more names mentioned when men get to talking about this extraordinary feature of the Mexican armies.

Chapo el Rurale is known throughout the Federal camps of Chihuahua to-day, and if he lives it is the belief that some day he will be a great fighter. Chapo is a bugler, now aged 14. It was about five years ago that Col. Anteon and Major Sanchez, then commanders of rurales, raided a bandit stronghold up in the mountains, killed off the men and brought back a nine-year-old boy as prisoner. They brought him back, they said, because even at his age they had roped him while he was trying to lift a rifle and join in the fight.

They adopted him formally into the command, gave him the name by which he is known and made him a bugler. Chapo took to the new life with entire content. Thereafter he was one of them, and when two years later the fighting began with the passing of Diaz he followed his chiefs without hesitation.

He has been in the field for three years now and generally he forgets that he carries a bugle. The rurales do not know, but they are willing to bet that Chapo can outride, outshoot, outfight any other boy in Mexico, give or take two years. They are sure that no boy can lead him any place and that no situation can arise which will make him falter. From all accounts Chapo would not be exactly a helpful companion for the ordinary boy of 14 and in fact he would object very seriously to such association himself. He prefers the society of men. The men of the

No one knows whether Juan Guerra, now 14, is alive or dead, but he won high favor with the Orozco forces. Juan was the helper on the machine gun of Tracy Richardson at the battle when that American soldier of fortune was shot through the lungs, which caused him to lose interest in a very hot engagement. Richardson was dragged to safety by some friends, the fourteenth man to drop out of the eighteen who had been at that one spot.

They forgot about the gun until some one suddenly realized that they could hear its sput! sput! sput! still continuing. One man crawled along a ditch to look and there was Juan Guerra, aged 13, seated in the seat running the belts through with the skill of an expert. When they were empty he loaded them and started in again.

The observer said he was doing fairly good shooting at that, and when the battle closed he staggered back with the gun. Juan was shot through the spleen in a later battle and was last seen in a hospital. He is believed to have recovered and to have joined again west of Chihuahua, but no one knows.

It goes without saying that a boy soldier is a wholesale looter. When the boys are tired of killing and torturing they turn their attention to property. They will take anything they find and are able to carry, destroying everything else from pure wantonness. If it is a hacienda they will smash the furniture, slash the pictures and array themselves in any garments they may find, the more incongruous the better for them. Sometimes, however, it is not useless loot. A fifteen-year-old boot-



Chapo El Rurale in the Trenches at Riano.

AFTER the Mexican Constitutionalist took Gomez Palacio last summer the first thing the victors did was to lead forth a batch of sixty Federal volunteers captured at the fall of the town. These were split up into squads of fifteen, lined up one after another against adobe walls and shot to death with no ceremony whatever.

This tragedy would hardly be worth recalling if it were not for one fact. Somewhere down south of the international line every week sees one side or the other make similar history. Sometimes there are as many as 300 lined up; sometimes only the survivors of a company. Such reports come so frequently across the border that nowadays the local newspapers narrate the tragedies in a sentence, except of course where one or more individuals are known by name or have once resided in the particular place where the newspaper is printed. Men read these sentence obituaries, shrug their shoulders and turn to the rest of the war news. It has ceased to mean anything to those who live almost within sound of the rifle shots; it cannot possibly mean anything to the readers of newspapers published far away.

The fact that makes the Gomez Palacio incident worth recalling is that the sixty prisoners were boys. They were not young men, but boys. The oldest was about 17, not quite, they say. Most of them were 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16, the age of the boys who are in the grammar schools and high schools of the north, still interested in tops, just showing themselves in real baseball, boys who like to stamp noisily into the house, sneak off in swimming, quarrel with brother and sister, make tragedies out of parental discipline and perhaps succumb to their first sweethearts in pigtails and short dresses.

Yet at that age these Mexican boys were marched forth, their hands tied behind their backs, jammed up against the wall and shot by firing squads and later by favored individuals who fought for the privilege of administering the last shot, the tiro de grace. They fell where they stood and it may be added that these same youngsters in the supreme moment faced it all without flinching. Not even the slightest of them whimpered or begged for mercy. They were soldiers and died like soldiers for a heinous offense against the

laws of civilized warfare. Duly enlisted, disciplined and accredited to the irregular forces of the Mexican Federal army, they had used a flag of truce to entice the enemy within easy rifle fire. Then they had poured forth volley after volley into their foes, killing and wounding many. They had fought desperately in the final assault and after the fall of the town they were the first to pay the penalty of defeat.

Men who have an accurate knowledge of Mexican military strength declare that there are at least 7,500 boys who are regularly enlisted soldiers at present on active duty in the field, one side or the other. This means boys under the age of 18 and as young as 11, just old enough to have the strength to carry a rifle. It does not include the boy cadets of the larger cities like Mexico, Vera Cruz, Tampico, Chihuahua and the like, who have expressed their determination to join the colors if the hated gringo comes across.

These boys are now fighting, they are now undergoing the lot of the soldier, accepting his chances, reaping his glory, paying the only price in defeat. They are visible in every camp, every town. They are with every command, Constitutional, Federal or bandit, and their number, like the number of women in the forces, is increasing all the time.

Juan Dozal, late lieutenant or chief of staff for Pancho Villa, rebel commander, said the other day that but for one thing he would rather have a regiment of boys than old men. Dozal himself is a proved fighter and his word should carry weight.

"They do not know what danger is," he explained. "They will go forward against anything, machine guns and artillery, up the sides of mountains or down a bullet swept street just as cheerfully as they will return to camp. The only thing against them," and Dozal shook his head mournfully, "is they can't shoot. They won't aim and they waste an awful lot of ammunition."

Upon this all are agreed, that a boy of 14 demoralized by a military life can be the most heartless, most cruel, most relentless human being on earth. Savagery becomes his first nature. In victory, even, the Mexican commander must restrain the boy soldiers before he

keeps back the women camp followers. Deliberate assassination and even torture become a delight to them. They will kill the helpless and the wounded for the sheer pleasure of killing and in the execution of prisoners they are always pleading for the privilege of administering the tiro de grace. This is an incident of the battle of Pedro Cima, told by a witness whose truthfulness is established. More than 100 prisoners were executed that day down back of the hospital. They were killed by squads and singly by men in details and by individuals. One officer shot fifteen himself.

At last it came down to one man whose gray beard and hair and shrunken form denoted great age. He had been taken to decide which should have the privilege to shoot this old man, who bound and blindfolded leaned against the wall awaiting the end. Both boys wanted the privilege, and as both were popular the officers in charge were in a quandary. Some one had a happy thought and it was suggested that they play monte to decide which should have the privilege. Seated on the ground five feet from their victim, surrounded by soldiers who laughed uproariously at their eagerness, they began their game. Fortune varied; now one boy was ahead and now the other. They signified their

delight by shouts of triumph. All this time the old man stood swaying against the wall, moaning slightly. At last with a shout of joy the elder boy won and jumped to his feet. The younger lad rose too, and he was crying. "What is the matter?" asked the victor and the loser sobbed out his sorrow over his defeat, which had deprived him of the pleasure of doing something he had never been allowed to do. This touched the heart of the winner, and he said the loser might shoot too. Standing within five feet of the condemned they shot him half a dozen times apiece and departed in high spirits. While the boy in the Mexican army as a rule sinks himself in the ranks and

command, where he rides up front, worships him and swears by him. They declare that he will never be touched by a bullet, for he was born lucky. Cabo Chiquito, the Little Corporal of Sonora, was not lucky, but his name will be remembered long and his reputation stands high. Orozco, now a Federal, was a rebel early this year, shifting late in the spring, and El Cabo Chiquito was a soldier of his command. He was about 15 and had received his warrant for sheer recklessness on the field.

Orozco held Ojinaga until the Federals came up and then he left for the south with very little ceremony. So close was the pursuit at this time that it became necessary to send back a strong rear guard to check the enemy in order that the pack trains might get away.

The Federals advanced and the firing became so hot that those of the rear guard surviving made a run for it. The Little Corporal started with them, but swung to the right, taking a position on the top of a mesa, where he squatted down back of a boulder. They killed him in time, but the Federals admitted that before they did get him he had killed eleven of their men. The Little Corporal was one of the boys able to shoot and his taking off was the envy of every youngster in the army.

John Miles, an American miner around Chihuahua, came into possession of a full blooded Yaqui Indian boy some years ago. The lad received the name of his patron and showed signs of developing into a miner himself until the war fever stirred up his incandescent blood. Miles, Sr., recognized the symptoms and took the lad to Gen. Ynez Salazar, who accepted him in his troop. Yaqui John Miles made a good soldier for the man who is a fairly good soldier himself, no matter what may be thought of some of his other qualities. He was intelligent, understood English and knew how to handle a gun. He was out on the advanced firing line at Villa Lopez when a rebel bullet caught him in the carotid artery and he died, aged 14.

Jose Blanco, 13 years old, began fighting at 12 and participated in the battles of Riano, Escalon, Casas Grandes, Parral, only to be captured at Cuatro Cieneegas by the Federals. He was executed.



John Miles, Yaqui Boy, Killed in Battle.

black of Chihuahua was a favorite with Salazar and accompanied that General on several campaigns. He was arrested over in Arizona and when he was taken to an American jail he managed to conceal \$15,000 in bills so that his jailers could not find it. That he had this money is well established, for he showed it when he got out.

Another young soldier came out of a campaign with four diamond rings and six watches, seeming to have specialized in that particular style of loot. Many of them brought silverware, toilet articles, trinkets, and even fancy clocks. All this stuff sooner or later trickles across the border.

There is no better spy than a boy forced into maturity by a military campaign. Boy spies are used to-day by all the commanders and the danger of the work seems only to make it more fascinating. A careless happy-go-lucky bootblack or mozo in Juarez has little attention paid to him until he makes a false move or some spy in the camp of his superior reveals his presence. One had more or less joined with Villa or Carranza is not noticed, for boys are coming and going all the time and the enlistment rolls are not very accurate. They have sharp ears and sharp eyes and are valuable until they are discovered.

Officers of the armies simply shrug their shoulders when asked about the boys of the army. "Why not?" ask some. Others say that with the system of enlistment it is impossible to be careful; besides the need of the country is very great. There is no formality about enlisting, no oaths, no examination, simply appears and "joins" as they say.

He gets a gun, partakes of the camp mess and he is then a soldier. The Captain sooner or later puts his name down on the list and if there is any pay the boy gets it—perhaps. The Captains draw the pay for all the men, and a boy who does not bother about his money means two pesos a day from the paymaster anyway.

Not even the most optimistic patriot will assert that the boy is an effective soldier, but he counts among the dead or among those to be executed after a battle just as much as a man. He may not be good now, it is further explained, but he is growing up. Some day he will be a man and then he will be trouble—some to whatever authority may exist at that time. Depraved beyond all Anglo-Saxon comprehending, with the cruelty of the savage Indian and the guerrilla skill of his own compatriots, he will be a problem which perhaps only the knife and the bullet may solve.

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